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REVISIONING THE BUDDHIST COSMOS:
SHIFTING PATHS OF REBIRTH IN MEDIEVAL CHINESE BUDDHISM

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On considère généralement que le cosmos bouddhique chinois médiéval est toujours conçu comme composé de Cinq ou Six Voies de renaissance, selon la présence ou l'absence du royaume des Asuras ou dieux guerriers. En fait, un modèle alternatif domine la documentation textuelle et matérielle à partir du milieu de l'époque Tang. Un examen détaillé des documents écrits, des rituels et des représentations de cette époque révèle qu'au VIII^e siècle le chemin des buddhas (fo dao) devient interchangeable avec le chemin des êtres célestes (tian dao) et mêlé des notions de Terre pure et de lieux paradisiaques. Ici, la distinction entre les Cinq Voies et les Six Voies n'a rien à voir avec la présence ou l'absence de la Voie des Asuras mais elle est liée à une relocalisation de la moralité et de l'émancipation : les Cinq Voies sont « mauvaises » alors que la Sixième Voie mène au salut. De cette façon, il y a toujours simultanément Cinq et Six Voies. Devenir un Buddha en suivant la Sixième Voie implique une transformation corporelle, comme tout processus transmigatoire, mais sa destination est transcendante et sotériologiquement définitive : la renaissance dans un lieu paradisiaque, soit Terre pure ou soit Ciel. Ce cas montre qu'il est important de comprendre que le bouddhisme chinois a été intégré d'une manière profonde dans la société chinoise, à la suite d'une interaction intense entre les deux parties (le bouddhisme et la société chinoise).

Death, in short, generates the underlying urgency that sustains the Buddhist tradition and also provides the paradigmatic occasion for reasserting its normative ideals, often with particularly dramatic force.¹

Paths of Rebirth and Their Contradictions

Buddhist discourses of death, rebirth and salvation, as well as their associated religious practices, have always been guided by cosmological models. The Buddhist universe is construed as inherently moral: the constitution of one's body in time and place evinces the totality of an individual's ethical engagements with the world and society.² Alternative forms of rebirth are one manifestation of this physio-moral

1. Bryan J. Cuevas and Jacqueline I. Stone, *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 2.

2. Stephen F. Teiser (*Reinventing the Wheel: Paintings of Rebirth in Medieval Buddhist Temples* [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007], 39) states: "The rebirth cosmology, I believe, deserves to be added to the growing list of problems deemed central to Buddhism: nirvāṇa, the

conception. These are typically described as sets of either Five or Six Paths (*wudao/qu* 五道/趣 or *liudao/qu* 六道/趣): (1) the path of hell (*diyu* 地獄), (2) the path of hungry ghosts (*egui* 餓鬼), (3) the path of animals (*chu* 畜), (4) the path of fighting gods, or Asuras (*axiuluo* 阿修羅), (5) the path of humans (*ren* 人), and (6) the path of heavenly beings (*tian* 天). The difference between the set of five paths and the set of six is typically explained by the exclusion of the fighting gods (Asuras).³ These are the samsāric paths — the rounds of rebirth rife with suffering. Outside of them, a variety of Pure Lands (*jingtu* 淨土), potentially offer release and salvation. But heaven itself is typically not considered a salvational realm; it is “a place of enjoyment, where the meritorious enjoy the fruits of good karma, but not a place of progress toward bodhisattva perfection.”⁴

This cosmological model, itself a multidimensional *gestalt*, can be depicted as the Wheel of Rebirth or Wheel of Life and Death (*samsāracakṛa*, *shengsilun* 生死輪) (Fig. 1).⁵ The center of the wheel shows the Three Poisons: a pig (delusion), a cock (greed), and a snake (hate) — zoomorphized psychological dispositions that keep the individual mired in an endless round of rebirths. The second and widest ring contains depictions of the above-mentioned Six Paths of possible rebirths. These are in turn encircled by the Twelve Conditions (*nidāna*, *yuānqi* 緣起) in the chain of causation, which perpetuate mortal existence. Soteriological possibilities offering an escape from rebirth are indicated by figures standing outside the wheel of *samsāra*, with Śākyamuni on the left and Maitreya on the right, and Avalokiteśvara below.

status of Buddha and his relics, no-self, dharmas, or the analysis of existence into its constituent parts, causality, monasticism and renunciation, the soteriological orientation of morality, and so on.”

3. For canonical sources concerning the Five Paths (*wudao* 五道), see Oda Tokunō 織田得能, *Oda Bukkyō daijiten* 織田佛教大辭典 (Revised small-print edition, Tōkyō: Daizō Shuppan 大藏出版, 1962), 549b; Mochizuki Shinkō 望月信亨, *Mochizuki Bukkyō daijiten* 望月佛教大辭典 (Revised augmented edition, Tōkyō: Sekai Seiten Kankō Kyōkai 世界聖典刊行協會, 1954), 1206b, 2906b; Xingyun Dashi 星雲大師 et al. (ed.), *Foguang da cidian* 佛光大辭典 (Gaoxiong 高雄: Foguang Chubanshe 佛光出版社, 1988), 1170, 1198. On the Five Destinies (*wuqu* 五趣), see Oda, *Bukkyō daijiten*, 532a; Mochizuki, *Bukkyō daijiten*, 1206b; *Foguang da cidian*, 1198. On the Six Paths (*liudao* 六道), see Oda, *Bukkyō daijiten*, 1711c, 1837c; Mochizuki, *Bukkyō daijiten*, 5071c, 1207a, 3624b; William Edward Soothill, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms: With Sanskrit and English Equivalents and a Sanskrit-Pali Index* (reprint Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977), 139. On the Six Destinies (*liuqu* 六趣), see Oda, *Bukkyō daijiten*, 1824b; Mochizuki, *Bukkyō daijiten*, 1207a; *Foguang da cidian*, 1298. See also Stephen F. Teiser, “Buddhism in China,” in Lindsay Jones, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed., New York: MacMillan Reference Books, 2005), v. 2, 1160–1169; and the following entries in the Robert E. Buswell (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (New York: MacMillan Reference Books, 2003): Mariko Namba Walter, “Ancestors,” 20–23 (esp. p. 22); Rupert Gethin, “Cosmology,” 183–187 (esp. p. 183); Stephen F. Teiser, “Folk Religion: An Overview,” 288–290 (esp. p. 288); Karil Kucera, “Hell, Images of,” 318–320; Rupert Gethin, “Realms of Existence,” 711–712 (esp. p. 711); Bryan J. Cuevas, “Rebirth,” 712–714 (esp. p. 713); Bryan J. Cuevas, “Samsāra,” 738–739 (esp. p. 739); and Daniel A. Getz, “Sentient Beings,” 760–761 (esp. p. 760). None of these entries provides an alternative to subtraction of the Asuras as an explanation for the difference between the Five and Six Paths.

4. Entry on *deva-gaṭi*, *tiandao* 天道, in Soothill, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, 147.

5. Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel*, 3–19, Pl. 3.



Fig. 1: Wheel of Life (*Saṃsāracakra*). Eastern Tibet, 18th c. Pigments on cotton, 60.3 x 41.9 cm. New York, Rubin Museum of Art.

The design of the Wheel is thus predicated on a specific understanding of how, driven by psychological motivations and the impersonal law of karma, *one confines oneself* through ethical choices to certain given physio-moral forms and spaces.⁶ By visually mapping a set of concepts and their relationships, the Wheel presents itself as a fundamental pedagogical tool for teaching basic Buddhist doctrine.⁷

The legitimacy and ubiquity of this model of the Buddhist cosmos has never been questioned. However, general considerations about the effective lack of the Wheel of Rebirth in the Chinese material and written record, together with a close examination of textual, visual, and ritual evidence — principally on paintings and manuscripts recovered from the Library Cave (Cave 17) at Mogao 莫高, Dunhuang 敦煌 (Gansu 甘肅) — reveal numerous contradictions that fundamentally problematize its very presence in medieval China and thus its explanatory power as a paradigm for understanding the Buddhist worldview.

First, and perhaps most striking, no images or carvings illustrating the Five and/or Six Paths as a Wheel of Rebirth are attested in medieval China prior to the ninth century; and post-ninth century examples number only four images total.⁸ Given the fundamental roles assigned to this model in confronting the anxieties of the afterlife, in conceptualizing the karmic possibilities of the medieval cosmos, and in transmitting those ideas, the paucity of representations requires explanation.

Second, textual evidence discussing or mentioning the creation, use, and dissemination of the Wheel of Rebirth is equally absent. With the exception of one fifth-century miracle tale (*zhiguai* 志怪) recounting a dream of the Wheel of Rebirth, no other tale or anecdote mentions it for the next five hundred years.⁹ It seems highly unlikely that these striking gaps in both the textual and the material record are due simply to a lack of preservation. Instead, they suggest the adoption, in China, of a model of the cosmos fundamentally different from that enshrined in the Wheel of Rebirth.

Third, the lack of material and textual illustrations of the Wheel of Rebirth does not imply that depictions of the Five or Six Paths were non-existent. To the contrary, they are illustrated in hundreds of painted, printed, and sculpted images throughout China. However, instead of the metaphor of the wheel, they employ the schema of diverging paths emanating from a center. This center is not the

6. *Ibid.*, 239-270

7. *Ibid.*, 50-75.

8. These four instances comprise two wheels of rebirth dated c.850 in Cave 75 at Kumtura 庫木吐喇, Kucha 庫車 (Xinjiang 新疆); one dated c.926 in Cave 19 at Yulin 榆林, Anxi 安西 (Gansu), and one from the thirteenth century at Baodingshan 寶頂山, Dazu 大足 (Sichuan 四川); see Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel*, 146-162, 163-192, 221-238.

9. This story is contained in Wang Yan's 王琰 (b. ca. 454 - fl. late fifth-early sixth c.) "Collection of Auspicious Signs from the Dark World" *Mingxiangji* 冥祥記. The tale elaborates how a governor by the name of Wang Qiu 王球 dreamed that he was given a scripture containing the names of Avalokiteśvara, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, and an additional bodhisattva and also saw an image of the Wheel of Five Paths (*Taishō* [T]2122, 53: 459b-c). The Wheel indexed the karmic causality of his previous acts, while the names of bodhisattvas furnished the means to salvation. See Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel*, 121-126, for a translation and discussion of this story.

self-inflicted psychological motivations zoomorphized as the Three Poisons, but an iconographically recognizable figure — either Kṣitigarbha/Dizang 地藏 or the “King Who Turns the Wheel of the Five Paths” (*Wudao zhuanlun wang* 五道轉輪王), the tenth among the Ten Kings of the Netherworld (*shiwang* 十王). This shift in focus also suggests that in China, conceptualizations of rebirth changed from their Indic prototypes according to local developments in the Buddhist religion.

Fourth, the Chinese terminology formally associated with rebirth and the afterlife, which often accompanies the images of the Paths of Rebirth, invariably refers to just five paths, not six. As mentioned, the tenth King of the netherworld, adjudicator of destinies, is titled “King Who Turns the Wheel of the Five Paths”, or sometimes General of the Five Paths (*Wudao jiangjun* 五道將軍). King Yama’s assistant is called either “Spirit of the Five Paths” (*Wudao shen* 五道神) or “Netherworld Officer of the Five Paths” (*Wudao mingsi* 五道冥司). There are no “Six-Paths” equivalents to any of these functionaries, such as a hypothetical “General of the Six Paths” 六道將軍. Paradoxically, however, Six Paths are often illustrated on images that either explicitly refer to or depict the functionaries of the Five Paths. How is it that one path escapes the bounds of their officious gaze?

Finally, a wide range of visual, textual, and ritual materials does depict the different modes of rebirth in exquisite detail. Paintings, sculpture, textual references, and ritual interaction centered on Kṣitigarbha, the Ten Kings, guiding bodhisattvas (*yinlu pusa* 引路菩薩), Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin 觀音, and others, illustrate the paths of reincarnation yet contradict the standard model in multiple details. Scholars have previously noted such contradictions appearing both within and among these images. For instance, Arthur Waley, when writing the catalogue of paintings from Dunhuang in the Stein collection, attempted to resolve these inconsistencies by ascribing them to confusion on the part of the Chinese believers.¹⁰ But is it really possible that they misunderstood their own religion?

In this essay I assert that it is scholars who have misconstrued Chinese Buddhist cosmology. Close scrutiny of visual, textual, and material evidence from the early Tang to Song periods fundamentally contradicts the notion of a cosmological model predicated on a set of either five or six Paths of Rebirth depending on the inclusion or exclusion of Asuras. Instead, my analysis will demonstrate that, in medieval Chinese conceptions, the realm of the Asuras is typically included among the saṃsāric paths, contradicting canonical definitions. This requires a radical rethinking of how the paths functioned in providing norms for reasoning about otherworldly options. We shall find that the variation between five or six Paths of Rebirth has to do with the explicit or implicit acknowledgement of a newly actualized path, that of becoming a Buddha, which blends with or replaces the saṃsāric Path of the Devas (*Tiandao* 天道). In other words, both Six Paths and Five Paths are operative, five saṃsāric and one transcendent, functioning together as a unified whole. A person’s transformation

10. Arthur Waley, *A Catalogue of Paintings Recovered from Tun-huang by Sir Aurel Stein*, K. C. I. E., Preserved in the Sub-department of Oriental Prints and Drawings in the British Museum, and in the Museum of Central Asian Antiquities, Delhi (London: The Trustees of the British Museum and The Government of India, 1931), 33, 114.

into a Buddha occurs through the same processes as other bodily rebirths. Rather than with the addition or subtraction of the Asuras, the difference has to do with a reallocation of morality and the possibility of emancipation: the Five Paths are “evil” and the Sixth Path is salvational. Coercion and discipline by netherworld officials apply to the Five Paths, but never to the Sixth. The Sixth Path of becoming a Buddha still involves bodily transformation like any other transmigratory process, but its destination is transcendent and soteriologically definitive: rebirth in a variety of paradisiacal realms, the Pure Lands among others. Moreover, that transformation occurs through the intercession of divine beings with whom one is obligated to establish personal relationships. Both karmic transformation and salvation are negotiated in conjunction with Kṣitigarbha, the Ten Kings, guiding bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara, and other figures. Rather than being unconnected and confused, these sets of imagery are consistent and systematic. But in sharp contrast to the impersonal nature of the wheel, which posits the individual as the lone author of his destinies, the Chinese model of rebirth draws on indigenous expectations of sociality and interpersonal relationships.¹¹ Each repeated encounter with a deity iteratively models a set of social circumstances requiring codified behavioral reciprocity (*lishang wanglai* 禮尚往來), which in turn elicit the proper affective response (*ganqing* 感情 or *ganying* 感應) appropriate to the ritual circumstances (*yuan* 緣) and place (*daochang* 道場).¹² The votive images from medieval China discussed below thus serve as models of human-divine interactions on multiple and overlapping levels. At the same time, they signal multifaceted changes in the conceptualization of the Buddhist cosmos in medieval China and its soteriological options.

11. Interestingly, such a conception reflects itself as well in the rare Chinese instances of the Wheel of Rebirth. While the centers of Wheels of Rebirth from Kumtura are unclear, the only other extant Wheels of Rebirth, from Yulin and from Dazu, replace the Three Poisons with the figure of a divine agent, most likely Kṣitigarbha.

12. These are among the core elements of ritualized interpersonal relations in the ancestral sacrifices of early China. The *locus classicus* for *lishang wanglai* is in *Liji* 禮記, “Quli” 曲禮 I, 10: 太上貴德·其次務施報·禮尚往來·往而不來·非禮也·來而不往·亦非禮也·人有禮則安·無禮則危·故曰·禮者不可不學也 “In the highest antiquity they prized (simply conferring) good; in the time next to this, giving and repaying was the thing attended to. And what the rules of propriety value is that reciprocity. If I give a gift and nothing comes in return, that is contrary to propriety; if the thing comes to me, and I give nothing in return, that also is contrary to propriety. If a man observes the rules of propriety, he is in a condition of security; if he does not, he is in one of danger. Hence there is the saying, ‘The rules of propriety should by no means be left unlearned’” (James Legge, *Lǐ Kǐ [Book of Rites]* [The Sacred Books of the East, Max Mueller (ed.), v. 27; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885], 65). For discussions of these concepts in late imperial and modern China, see Xiangqun Chang, “Lishang-laiwang: Social Support Networks, Reciprocity and Creativity in a Chinese Village” (Ph.D dissertation, City University of London, 2004); Andrew Kipnis, *Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North China Village* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1997); Yunxiang Yan, *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); and Mayfair Meihui Yang, *Gifts, Favors and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationship in China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). I apply these ideas to medieval Chinese Buddhism in a monograph currently in preparation.

This conceptual framework provides an elegant resolution to the issues outlined above: the Wheel of Rebirth's disappearance from medieval China, the seemingly conflicting discourse regarding the Five/Six Paths and the netherworld bureaucracy, and the apparent confusion of iconography. It also does justice to the complexities of the medieval Buddhist cosmos with its proliferation of options for non-samsāric rebirth. For by the eighth century, in addition to five worldly destinations, potential places of rebirth came to include the various Pure Lands, Tuṣita and Trāyastriśa Heavens, the Merit Lodge (*fushe* 福舍), the Palace of the Seven Jewels (*qibao gong-dian* 七寶宮殿), and even Daoist-like heavenly grottoes.¹³ The Sixth Path, already associated with heavenly realms, was thus able to embrace a variety of favorable rebirths leading to Buddhahood, yet it did not determine the specific destinations. Furthermore, the model's focus on Kṣitigarbha and the Ten Kings foregrounds the necessity of ritual interaction to gain access to this Sixth Path. The cultural logic behind this interaction lays in ritual reciprocity (*lishang wanglai*), as explained above.

The revised paradigm also articulates a fundamental aspect of Chinese sociability: the greeting (*jie* 接) and sending off (*song* 送) of guests. Images of the Sixth Path show the descent of a divine figure who will act as the practitioner's psychopomp in the generalized role of "the bodhisattva who leads" (*yinlu pusa*); they also show the departure of the deceased. This leading and departing are standard features of medieval Buddhist mortuary rituals. In this sense, the *laiying* 來迎 (in Japanese, *raigō*) figures of Pure Land Buddhism are expressions of patterns of ritual and social interaction indigenous to East Asia, which are assimilated to this soteriological model. By contrast, the canonical presentations of the Five or Six Paths and their visual illustration in the form of a wheel offer no room for such expressions. Central to the success of the revised paradigm is the assimilation of indigenous social scripts and frames, functioning as it does within a complex ecology of localized cultural models.

Some Remarks on Method

In his work on medieval European Christianity, Jacques Le Goff discusses the profound changes in the conceptualization of the afterlife that gave birth to the notion of purgatory. More than a conceptual or doctrinal change, the genesis of purgatory and the reconfigured Christian cosmos reflected social transformations. Once the notion of purgatory was established, the increasing standardization of rituals such as prayer, penitential acts, vows, and merit-making enabled adherents to negotiate this moral topography. Sermons, exempla, and narratives of otherworldly journeys combined with images further expanded this model in graphic detail. Across a range of evidence, Le Goff establishes a coherent model of the afterlife that embodies an inferential logic, the "logic of purgatory."¹⁴

13. For a survey of these options see Zhiru, *The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva: Dizang in Medieval China*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 177-187, 201.

14. Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984),

Analogous work has been carried out in the Chinese context, where manuscripts and archaeological finds from the Late Warring States, Qin, and Han periods (ca. 350 BC-AD 220) document shifts in the social and political landscape that established new cultural and cosmological paradigms. Most centrally, the concerns of the living about the menacing dead came to render the tomb at once a household and cosmos.¹⁵ The tomb occupant was spatially situated in relation to cosmic possibilities of the afterlife that were inscribed on, in, and through the grave and its furnishings. In the late third-century BC tomb chamber of the First Emperor of Qin 秦始皇 at Lintong 臨潼 (Shaanxi), for example, the ceiling represented the Vault of Heaven and the ground floor the topography of the earth, and the placement of the emperor at the center manifested his cosmologically central role.¹⁶ Tomb 1 at Mawangdui 馬王堆, Changsha 長沙 (Hunan 湖南), dated to the mid-first century BC, provides another material illustration of the universe in schematic form. The tomb itself is at once the household of the deceased, the netherworld, the immortal realm, and the extended cosmos.¹⁷ The painted banner placed on the innermost coffin features the three layers of the cosmos from the bottom up: the watery netherworld, the land of the living, and the celestial realm above.¹⁸

Like the purgatory of the medieval West, early Chinese tombs and the Mawangdui banner are examples of how cultures use cognitive models to structure understanding and experience — models that are instantiated through cultural practice and given material form for transmission and retention.¹⁹ Such *gestalt* representations

209-234; Peter Marshall, “‘The Map of God’s Word’: Geographies of the Afterlife in Tudor and Early Stuart England,” in Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (ed.), *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 110-130.

15. E.g., Wu Hung, “From Temple to Tomb: Ancient Chinese Art and Religion in Transition,” *Early China* 13 (1988): 78-115; Mark E. Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2006), 119-130; and Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1000-250 BC): The Archaeological Evidence* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2006), 298-325.

16. See Jessica Rawson, “The Eternal Palaces of the Western Han: A New View of the Universe,” *Artibus Asiae* 59.1/2 (1999), 5-58, and “The Power of Images: The Model Universe of the First Emperor and Its Legacy,” *Historical Research* 75.188 (2002), 123-154.

17. Wu Hung, “Art in a Ritual Context: Rethinking Mawangdui,” *Early China* 17 (1992): 111-144.

18. Wu Hung, “From Temple to Tomb”; Constance A. Cook, *Death in Ancient China: The Tale of One Man’s Journey* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 129-147. See also Martin J. Powers, “An Archaic Bas-Relief and the Chinese Moral Cosmos in the First Century A.D.,” *Ars Orientalis* 12 (1981): 25-40.

19. For discussions of cultural models (also referred to as cultural schemata, conceptual models, idealized cognitive models, and folk models) from an anthropological perspective, see Roy G. D’Andrade and Claudia Strauss, *Human Motives and Cultural Models* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn, *Cultural Models in Language and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn, *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Bradd Shore, *Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture, and the Problem of Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). See also Alan Cienki, “Frames, Idealized Cognitive Models, and

are intersubjective constructs that schematize knowledge and experience into “chunks” such as scripts, scenarios, and referential frames. They provide efficient mental strategies for individuals to gain access to complex sets of knowledge rapidly, simultaneously, and without sequential restraints, such as having to go through a checklist of semantic features.²⁰

Cognitive models constrain but do not determine thought and action. Each of its components or “slots” can integrate a wide variety of information, yet the model remains recognizable as a coherent *gestalt*,²¹ schematically compressing the most salient characteristics of an experience. As their constituent parts are interrelated, invoking a portion of the composition provides access to the entirety of the model. In Le Goff’s words: “Purgatory was one component of a system – the system of the hereafter – and is meaningless unless viewed in conjunction with the other elements of that system.”²²

Medieval China witnessed a decisive shift in Buddhist cosmological schemata, their constituent parts, and the underlying inferential logic. This article discusses the material and visual manifestations of this transformation, which remains invisible in traditional accounts based merely on canonical scriptures. Like the Christian model of purgatory, Qin and Han-period tombs, and the Mawangdui banner, the Buddhist images, objects, and documents discussed below instantiate cultural models that schematize and spatialize the hereafter and position the deceased within a larger framework of relationships and destinies. These physical objects act as “material anchors,” stabilizing complex conceptual frameworks and enabling their performative representation through ritual processes. Images, objects, and spaces thus integrate rich complexes of meaning and action in the location where they occur, and they can in turn provide a platform for further elaborations of meaning. As it unfolds “in the wild” through material artifacts, cognition is thus distributed across domains exterior to the mind.²³

Domains,” in Dirk Geeraerts and Hubert A. C. Cuyckens (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 170–187; Melford E. Spiro, “Collective Representations and Mental Representations in Religious Symbol Systems,” in James Fernandez et al. (ed.), *On Symbols in Anthropology: Essays in Honor of Harry Hoijer, 1980* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1982), 45–72.

20. See Anna Wierzbicka, “Prototypes Save: On the Uses and Abuses of the Notion of ‘Prototype’ in Linguistics and Related Fields,” in Savas L. Tsohatzidis (ed.), *Meanings and Prototypes: Studies in Linguistic Categorization* (London: Routledge, 1990), 347–366 and Raymond W. Gibbs, *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 31–35, and Charles J. Fillmore, “An Alternative to Checklist Theories of Meaning,” *Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, 1 (1975): 123–131.

21. Roy G. D’Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 123.

22. Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 7.

23. See Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996). The implications of Hutchins’s ideas and Merlin Donald’s related notion of material objects as external memory storage or “exograms” (Donald, *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993], 269–360) are examined,

The prioritization of material evidence is central to this new understanding of the cosmological model of medieval Chinese Buddhism. It is my contention, moreover, that the neglect of such evidence in the past has led to distortions and misconceptions. In retrospect, it is obvious that the canonical sources are inadequate to describe the operation of religious realities that are essentially extra-textual.²⁴ More broadly speaking, purely textual accounts are poor indicators of cultural models and their rich associations. Meaning develops on the basis of frames and models, and these in turn define the categories they structure and the operative concepts within those categories. The lexical items that denote concepts and categories are dependent on these models.²⁵ Such a conceptualization of meaning-making fundamentally challenges research paradigms that are dominated by texts to the exclusion of material culture. As Maurice Bloch writes,

There is therefore considerable evidence that learning is not just a matter of storing received knowledge, as most anthropologists implicitly assume when they equate cultural and individual representations, but that it is a matter of constructing apparatuses for the efficient handling and packing of specific domains of knowledge and practice. Furthermore, evidence shows that once these apparatuses are constructed, the operations connected with these specific domains not only *are* non-linguistic but also *must* be non-linguistic if they are to be efficient. It follows that much of the knowledge which anthropologists study necessarily exists in people's heads in a non-linguistic form.²⁶

Change and the Wheel of Rebirth

Below I examine paintings, images on manuscripts, and votive inscriptions associated with the Paths of Rebirth in order to delineate the rise of the alternative cosmological paradigm sketched out above. The first, canonical, set of visual

e.g., in Colin Renfrew and Chris Scarre (ed.), *Cognition and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Symbolic Storage* (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 1998), and Colin Renfrew, Chris Frith, and Lambros Malafouris, *The Sapient Mind: Archaeology Meets Neuroscience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). See, furthermore, Edward G. Slingerland, *What Science Offers the Humanities: Integrating Body and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and, for material instantiations of modularity, Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

24. See n. 27.

25. In the words of Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green (*Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction* [New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006], 368): "In sum, meaning is not simply pre-existing stored knowledge encoded by language. Cognitive semanticists argue that the naive view, which views words as 'containers' for meaning and language as a conduit for the transfer or externalisation of pre-existing meaning, is erroneous. Instead, meaning construction is seen as a complex process that takes place at the conceptual level. Words and grammatical constructions are merely partial and impoverished prompts upon which highly complex cognitive processes work giving rise to rich and detailed conceptualisation."

26. Maurice Bloch, *How We Think They Think: Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory, and Literacy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 10-11 (emphasis in the original). See also Galina Lindquist, "Travelling by the Other's Cognitive Maps or Going Native and Coming Back," *Ethnos* 60.1-2 (1995): 6-40.

representations of the Paths of Rebirth is associated with the Wheel of Life and Death (*samsāracakra* 生死輪), described in the vinaya text of the Mūlasarvāstivāda school, the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya vibhāṅga*, and also in the *Divyāvadāna*, a Sanskrit compilation of karmic stories dating from the fourth century.²⁷ Initial descriptions of the wheel present five paths (*pañcagaṭi samsāracakra*), although scholastic works such as Kumārajīva's rendering of the third century *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra* by Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu's fifth-century *Abhidharmakośabbāṣya*, translated by Paramārtha and Xuanzang 玄奘 (sixth and seventh century), provide oft-cited canonical justification for Six Paths as standard in medieval China.²⁸ These doctrinal sources are cited in modern scholarship on the Six Paths, which in turn furnish the accepted definitions of both the Five and the Six Paths.

However, in the following centuries, fundamental soteriological beliefs, practices, and agendas shifted to include a variety of salvific options oriented toward rebirth in a variety of Pure Lands. The previously dominant representation of the processes of rebirth in South and Central Asia, the "Wheel of Life" (*bhavacakra* 輪回 or 生死輪), faded from the medieval Chinese scene.²⁹ By the seventh century, other sets of explanatory images came to the fore, namely depictions of Kṣitigarbha with the Six Paths of Rebirth, often accompanied by the Ten Kings of the netherworld, as well as illustrated versions of the *Scripture of the Ten Kings* (*Shi wang jing* 十王經).³⁰

27. For the account in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya vibhāṅga* (*Genben shuoyiqie youbu pinaiye* 根本說一切有部毘奈耶, Yijing 義淨 trans., c. 703), see T1442, 23: 810c-811c. Teiser (*Reinventing the Wheel*, 50-79) translates the relevant passages and discusses this work as well as the source and the account found in the *Divyāvadāna* ("Avadānas of the Gods") a text in Sanskrit dating from c. 350CE.

28. "Previously one explained [samsāra] with the Five Paths. Now one adds the path of asuras." 先說五道今益阿修羅道。See *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*, *Mahā bore poluomi jing shilun* 摩訶般若波羅蜜經釋論, "Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom," attrib. Nāgārjuna 龍樹, Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 trans. T1509, 25: 280a. Passages in both the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra* and *Abhidharmakośabbāṣya* ("Treatise on the Abhidharma Storehouse") *Apidamo jushe lun* 阿毘達磨俱舍論 (T1558, 30: 29.1-160), by Vasubandhu 世親, trans. by Paramārtha 真諦 (c. 563-567) and Xuanzang 玄奘 (c. 651-654). See Étienne Lamotte, trans. *Le Traité de la grande vertu de sagesse: Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra* [T1509, 25: 57-756] (5 v., Bibliothèque du Muséon, 18; Louvain: Institut orientaliste, Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1970-1981), 613-614, n. 1, and 1955-1957. The canonicity of a Six-Path or a Five-Path scheme was an ongoing and hotly debated issue among various schools in early Buddhism, a debate that the author of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra* clearly sought to end. For further secondary studies, see Mibu Taishun 王生台舜, "Rokudōsetsu ni kansuru nisan no mondai ni tsuite" 六道說到關する二、三の問題について in Kōyasan Daigaku Bukkyōgaku Kenkyūshitsu 高野山大學佛教學研究室 (ed.), *Bukkyō to bunka: Nakagawa Zenkyō Sensei shōtoku kinen ronshū* 中川善教先生頌德記念論集 (Kyōto: Dōhōsha Shuppan 同朋舍出版, 1983), 539-552; Guo Zhongsheng 郭忠生, "Liudao yu wudao" 六道與五道, in Shi Hengqing 釋恆清 (ed.), *Fojiao sixiang de chuancheng yu fazhan: Yinshun daoshi jiuzhi buadan zhushou wenji* 佛教思想的傳承與發展: 印順導師九秩華誕祝壽文集 (Taipei: Dongda Tushu Gongsì 東大圖書公司, 1996), 137-168; Paul Demiéville et al., *Hōbōgirin: Dictionnaire encyclopédique du Bouddhisme d'après les sources chinoises et japonaises*, v. 1 (Tōkyō, 1929), 40-44.

29. See Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel*.

30. See Du Doucheng 杜斗城, *Dunhuang ben 'Foshuo shi wang jing' jiaolu yanjiu* 敦煌本'佛說十王經'校錄研究 (Lanzhou 蘭州: Gansu Jiaoyu chubanshe 甘肅教育出版社, 1989). Stephen F.

Investigation of all these fails to provide any support for the standard model of either Five or Six Paths depending on the inclusion of Asuras. What appears instead is an entirely revised articulation of soteriological possibilities predicated on the concerns and patterns of Chinese ritual interaction.

Kṣitigarbha Imagery and the Paths of Rebirth

A discussion of the Dunhuang painting “Kṣitigarbha, as Lord of the Six Ways” (Stein Painting 19), dated to AD 963 (Fig. 2), underscores the disjuncture between canonical descriptions of the Six Paths in texts and their appearance and significance on donative objects.³¹ This painting is typical in many respects of the tenth century votive images of Kṣitigarbha. It shows a central deity with the Six Paths emanating from his body, each representing a possible birth; proceeding clockwise from top left, we see devas, animals, hell, men, asuras, and hungry ghosts.

Of particular interest is the figure in the upper left corner (Fig. 3). Its appearance and style are common among most of the so-called “deva” figures accompanying Kṣitigarbha of the Six Paths. Yet on close examination, it is apparent that this is not a deva but a bodhisattva dressed in the typical *paridhāna* (i.e., dhoti), hands in *añjali mudrā*, and with a signal halo. This identification of the figure is supported by the dedicatory text on the painting, which runs as follows:

其斯繪者厥有清信弟子康清奴·身居火宅·恐墮於五趣之中·禍福無常·心願於解脫之人·
今者更染患疾未得痊瘳願微痼速退於身軀·煩惱永離於原體·功德乃金錫振動地獄·生蓮珠
耀迷途還同淨土·更願親姻眷屬並休康寧昆季枝羅同霽福分·建隆四年癸亥歲五月廿二日題記

The maker of this painting is the disciple of pure faith, Kang Qingnu. He himself lives in the Burning House and he fears sinking in the Five Paths where fortune and misfortune are never constant. His cherished aspiration is to be among those liberated. Even more, he is now wracked by illness and still has not recovered. He desires that the minor afflictions retreat rapidly from his body and that troubles leave his original form. With this charitable deed then [Kṣitigarbha's] shakes his golden staff in Hell bringing forth lotus blossoms and his [wish-fulfilling] jewel illuminates the illusory paths even through to the Pure land. Furthermore, he desires that his in-laws and his family rest in good health, and that his brothers and extended families be imbued with a portion of these blessings. Recorded on the 22nd day of the 5th lunar month, a Guihai year and the 4th year of Jianlong era [AD 963, Northern Song Dynasty].

Teiser, in *The Scripture of the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Chinese Buddhism* (Studies in Chinese Buddhism, v. 9; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994) discusses the Ten Kings and *Yanluowang shouji jing* 閻羅王授記經 at length. For an examination of Kṣitigarbha in medieval China, see Zhiru, *The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva*.

31. Discussed in Roderick Whitfield, *The Stein collection in the British Museum* (Tōkyō: Kōdansha International, 1983), v. 2, 318; Waley, *A Catalogue of Paintings Recovered from Tunhuang*, p. 34; Wendy L. Adamek, “The Impossibility of the Given: Representations of Merit and Emptiness in Medieval Chinese Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 45.2 (2005): 151-154 (where this image is mistakenly labeled Fig. 1 — it is in fact Fig. 3; its identification as Stein 14 is incorrect).



Fig. 2: Kṣitigarbha, Lord of the Six Ways 地藏菩薩圖, from Cave 17 at Mogao, Dunhuang (Gansu), dated 963. Ink and colors on silk, 68.6 x 61 cm. London, British Museum (Stein Painting 19).



Fig. 3: Detail of Fig. 2.



Fig. 4: Kṣitigarbha, Lord of the Six Ways 地藏菩薩圖, from Cave 17 at Mogao, Dunhuang (Gansu), dated 851. Ink and colors on silk, 121.9 x 55.4 cm. London, British Museum (Stein Painting 29).



Fig. 5: “Path of becoming a Buddha” 成佛道. Detail of Fig. 4.

What is doctrinally implicit in this donative inscription, and others like it, is illustrated explicitly in the image itself: there are six paths emanating from Kṣitigarbha, yet only five are referenced in the dedicatory text. The first motivation given for the creation of the image is the fear of “falling into the Five Paths where fortune and misfortune are never constant” 恐墮於五趣之中，禍福無常. But why not say “falling into the *Six Paths*”? After all, the image clearly illustrates six paths, and the Six Paths constitute one standard model of the saṃsāric or Saha world.

The answer to this conundrum is that the sixth path depicted in this and other paintings of Kṣitigarbha as Lord of the Six Ways is not saṃsāric. Rather than a *deva*, it portrays a bodhisattva figure, and it indicates a path which leads to Buddhahood. The Buddha Path is thus not one of the paths that one need fear falling into — one of the Five Evil Paths (*wu e dao* 五惡道). This is very much at variance with the canonical definitions of the Six Paths in such treatises as the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra* and the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, which do argue differences between a set of five and a set of six, but do not single out one path as preferential, let alone salvific. Nor is Stein Painting 19 an aberration or the small figure in Fig. 3 a mispainted deva: another contemporaneous painting from Dunhuang, “Kṣitigarbha as Lord of the Six Ways” (Stein Painting 29), dated to AD 851 (Fig. 4), explicitly spells out the significance of the sixth path on the upper right path by labeling it as the “path of becoming a Buddha” *chengfo dao* 成佛道 (Fig. 5).³²

32. See Waley, *A Catalogue of Paintings Recovered from Tun-huang*, 47–48.

In his catalogue of paintings in the Stein Collection, Arthur Waley notes this disquieting inclusion of the Buddha Path as one of the Six Paths of Rebirth. Although he admits that this iconography is the norm in Dunhuang images, he nonetheless ascribes it to “confusion” on the part of Chinese Buddhists.³³ But the “Six and Five” configuration is by no means limited to images of Kṣitigarbha as Lord of the Six Ways. The other primary representation of the saṃsāric possibilities of life and death during this period, the illustrated *Scripture of the Ten Kings*, also features the same arrangement both explicitly in the imagery and implicitly through its account of the normative options for rebirth.

Imagery of the Ten Kings and The Paths of Rebirth

Like the representations of Kṣitigarbha Lord of the Six Paths, a ninth-century illustrated manuscript of the *Scripture of the Ten Kings* from Dunhuang (S.3961) attests a configuration that differs completely from canonically based assumptions of what the medieval Buddhist cosmos should be. In the final section (Fig. 6), the consequences of karmic changes in one’s destiny (*fenduan bianyi* 分段變易) dramatically flow forth from the tenth court. Here, the decisive judgment is made by the “King Who Turns the Wheel of Rebirth of the Five Paths” (*Wudao zhuanlun wang*). This image is remarkable for the variety of karmic transformations it depicts,³⁴ but on closer view it is obvious that it presents six paths, not five. Once again, the path presumed to be that of the devas is in fact the Path of Buddhas (*fodao* 佛道); an inscription explicitly names it as such (Fig. 7). Buddhahood now necessarily entails bodily transformation, just like any other karmic path; moreover, it becomes a transmigratory option decreed by the Ten Kings of the Dark Regions. The Paths of Life and Death — and thus the cosmos itself — have been re-configured into immediate possibilities predicated on the Pure-Land goal of transformation of every devotee’s body into the *Buddha body*.

The illuminated manuscript S.3961 is by no means the only instance of Ten Kings imagery where the Sixth Path is depicted as the Buddha Path. Another example is Stein Painting 80 (Fig. 8), which shows the Tenth King of Hell together with the Six Paths, one of which contains a bodhisattva figure appearing with the characteristic *paridhāna*, *añjali mudrā*, and halo.³⁵ Waley’s catalogue entry on this

33. *Ibid.*, 33 and 114.

34. The asura figure holding the sun and moon is a reference to worldly options of rebirth. Asuras frequently appear in Dunhuang images in reference to Mount Sumeru signifying the saṃsāric world. The “snake path” *shedao* 蛇道 refers to one of the four forms of birth, *sisheng* 四生 *caturyoni*, i.e. that of *shisheng* 濕生 *saṃsvedajā*, moisture or water-born, as with snakes and fishes. The other types of birth are viviparous or mammalian, *tai* 胎 or *sheng* 生 *jarāyuja*; oviparous or egg-born, *luansheng* 卵生 *aṇḍaja*, such as birds; and transfigurational, *huasheng* 化生 *aupapāduka*, such as devas, hell beings, or moths transformed from chrysalis (see *Foguang da cidian*, 1680). The insertion of a seemingly incorrect yet closely related category highlights the schematic and hence generic function of these paths and their ability to be adapted to the exigencies at hand.

35. See Whitfield, *The Art of Central Asia*, v. 2, Pl. 63.



Fig. 6: The Tenth King of Transformations. Section of an illuminated manuscript of the *Scripture of the Ten Kings*, from Cave 17 at Mogao, Dunhuang (Gansu), 10th century. Ink on paper, 29 x 491 cm. London, British Library (S.3961).



Fig. 7: Detail of Fig. 6.



Fig. 8: "Illustrations to the Scripture of the Ten Kings," from Cave 17 at Mogao, Dunhuang (Gansu), Five Dynasties (10th century). Ink and colors on paper, 250.2 x 27.9 cm. London, British Library (Stein painting 80).



Fig. 9: The Tenth King, the "King Who Turns the Wheel of Rebirth of the Five Paths" 五道轉輪王. Detail of an illustrated manuscript of the *Scripture of the Ten Kings*, from Cave 17 at Mogao, Dunhuang (Gansu). Pigments on paper, 29 to 30.7 x 615.2 cm. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (P.2870).

painting insists on a canonical reading of this image in the face of its obviously uncanonical iconography: “On left, figures representing the Six Ways, standing on cloud-wreaths: (1) Brahmā (six-armed) representing the Way of Gods. (2) A Bodhisattva-like figure representing the Way of Asuras. (3) A man and woman in Chinese dress representing the Way of Men. Then (4) horse and two-humped camel (Way of Animals). (5) Figure in loin-cloth (Way of Pretas). (6) Horned demon stirring cauldron (Way of Demons).”³⁶ But the iconographic parallels adduced above make it obvious that the “bodhisattva-like figure” in fact is just that, a bodhisattva.

In Stein Painting 80 and the illustrated manuscript S.3961, all of the Six Paths are shown. Yet not all pictorial renditions display the complete set of the Six Paths; some, such as the manuscript P.2870, show only five (Fig. 9). Entitled “Scripture on the Prophecy of King Yama Rāja On the Sevens of Life as Pre-mortem Ritual for the Four Classes of Beings for Rebirth Into the Pure Land as Spoken by the Buddha” 佛說閻羅王授記四眾逆修生七往生淨土經, this manuscript presents the entirety of that scripture with illustrations.³⁷ In the final and decisive episode of the text, we see the Tenth King — the “King Who Turns the Wheel of the Five Paths” — with the Five Paths flowing forth. The Buddha Path is not among them, but this is of little importance. Notably present, by contrast, is the Path of the Asuras — precisely the destiny that, following the canonical texts, one would expect to be absent when the paths number only five. As in the images introduced above, the asura is rendered as a stylized four-armed figure.

Illustrations, textual references, and the principal figures connected with Kṣitigarbha and the Ten Kings make clear that the Five Paths are nefarious, but not the Sixth. One falls into the Five Evil Paths (*duo wu e dao* 墮五惡道), to which one is directed by the “King Who Turns the Wheel of Rebirth of the Five Paths.” This Tenth King overlaps in function with another of King Yama’s assistants, the General of the Five Paths (*Wudao jiangjun* 五道將軍), who keeps control of destinies. The names and roles of other netherworld officials also indicate that only the Five Paths were of concern in that sphere. Collections of stories detailing visits to the netherworld such as Tang Lin’s 唐臨 *Records of Miraculous Retribution* (*Mingbaoji* 冥報記) (c. 650) refer to King Yama’s assistants as “Spirits of the Five Paths” (*Wudao shen* 五道神) and mention the “Netherworld Officer of the Five Paths” (*Wudao mingsi* 五道冥司).³⁸ A similar figure, “The Officer who Patrols the

36. Waley, *A Catalogue of Paintings Recovered from Tun-huang*, 114.

37. Teiser (*The Scripture of the Ten Kings*, 8–11) discusses the three different versions of the scripture found at Dunhuang. P.2780 contains the long recension. For a complete translation of this version, see Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings*, 197–219.

38. *Mingbaoji* 冥報記 by Tang Lin 唐臨, T2082, 51: 787b–802a. These seem to be variations on General of the Five Paths. See *Fayuan zbulin* 法苑珠林, T2122, 53: 316a and *Mingbaoji* 793b. See the story of Sui Renqian 睚仁蒨, translated in Donald E. Gjerfson, *Miraculous Retribution: A Study and Translation of T'ang Lin's Ming-pao Chi* (Centers for South and Southeast Asia Studies, University of California at Berkeley, 1989), 196–202. See also Glen Dudbridge, “The General of the Five Paths in Tang and Pre-Tang China,” *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 9 (1996–1997): 85–98. Note that the epistemological status of the Six Paths differs from that of the Five Paths: no “Six-Paths” equivalent exists to the oft-repeated expression that “Spiritual knowledge of the Five

Five Paths” (*Wudao xunguansi* 五道巡官司) appears in esoteric texts such as Bodhiruci’s 菩提流志 *Scripture on the Buddha Mind* (*Foxin jing* 佛心經), and others.³⁹ The “Transformation Text on Mahāmaudgalyāyana” (*Da Mujianlian bianwen* 大目犍連變文) clarifies the enormous significance of the General of the Five Paths in very simple terms: “If you ask which is the most crucial place on the infernal paths, none exceeds that of the Great General of the Five Ways” 若聞冥途刑·要處，無過此箇大將軍。⁴⁰ And just as there is no Six-Paths substitute for the Great General of the Five Paths, no specific alternative Six-Paths figures exist for any of these other bureaucratic characters and their roles.

The uniqueness of the Sixth Path vis-à-vis the netherworld court and its officious minions of the Five Paths becomes more conspicuous when one realizes that a prominent model for a potential coterie of “Six Officers” was readily available yet remained curiously ignored; the worldly government and the netherworld government were both thought to have Six Ministries (*liubu* 六部). The “Records of Miraculous Retribution,” for example, explicitly link the government of the living and the government of the dead, each having, among other similarities, the Six Ministries. However, the Six Ministries of the netherworld are overseen by the Spirits of the Five Paths (*wudao shen*). Even though the text begins by framing a moral cosmos in terms of Six Paths, the Sixth Path, strangely, is never discussed.⁴¹

Paths” *wudao shenshi* 五道神識 is necessary to distinguish good paths from bad 善惡所趣, which is found as early as Zhu Fonian’s 竺佛念 translation of the *Pusa cong Doushutian jiang shenmutai shuo guangpu jing* 菩薩從兜術天降神母胎說廣普經 (T384, 12: 1033c) (c. 400) and also appears in Yongming Yanshou’s 永明延壽 (904-976) massive Chan compilation “Record of the Axiom Mirror” *Zongjing lu* 宗鏡錄 (T2016, 48: 745b) (dated 961) as well as Fayun’s 法雲 “Compilation of Translated Buddhist Terms” *Fanyi mingyi ji* 翻譯名義集 (T2131, 54: 1154c), completed in 1143.

39. E.g., *Foxin jing pin yi tong dasuiqiu tuoluoni* 佛心經品亦通大隨求陀羅尼 (also known as 佛心經) T920, 19: 4b, cited in Dudbridge, “The General of the Five Paths,” 96. Note that the Netherworld Officer of the Five Paths (*Wudao mingsi*) appears as a key figure in the miraculous account of the *Uṣṇīṣavijayā-dhāraṇī*, the *Jiaju lingyan foding zunsheng tuoluoni ji* 加句靈驗佛頂尊勝陀羅尼記, T974c, 19: 386b.

40. Translation from Victor H. Mair, *Tun-huang Popular Narratives* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 98, who adds “of the Five Ways.” The passage in the manuscript makes clear the general is the official who controls the Five Paths only. See Huang Zheng 黃征 et al. (ed.), *Dunhuang bianwen jiaozhu* 敦煌變文校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, 1997), 1028-1029.

41. *Mingbaoji* 793b: “The Heavenly Emperor governs Six Paths, which are called the heavenly offices. King Yama is equivalent to the human emperor, and the prefectural lord of Mount Tai is like the Imperial Personal Secretary who records [deeds]. The Spirits of the Five Paths are like the secretaries of the [Six] Ministries...” 天帝總統六道·是謂天曹·閻羅王者如人天子·太山府君尚書令錄·五道神如諸尚書 (Translated after Gjertson, *Miraculous Retribution*, 201, with emendations). The *Scripture of the Ten Kings* does mention the dark bureaucrats of the Six Paths 六道冥官 (Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings*, 205; X21, 1: 408c14) though this usage seems to be a collective (*yiqie* 一切) reference to all involved with the paths of rebirth (here making a vow to exempt the deceased from punishment 爾時二十八重·一切獄主·閻羅天子·六道冥官·禮拜發願). The term *liudao mingguan* 六道冥官 is glossed in the following verse as *mingguan zhuj* 冥官注記 “netherworld official and note-takers”; later in the scripture the collective entity of netherworld government is specified in detail, citing only the “Great Spirits of the Five Paths” (*Wudao dashen* 五道大神). See Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings*, 209-210, and the edited text

In all the materials mentioned, we may thus perceive a consistent textual discourse concerning the paths of rebirth predicated on the alternative cosmology of a set of Six Paths in which one path is differentiated from the other five; and this discourse came to dominate medieval Buddhism in China. The sets of images involving Kṣitigarbha and the Ten Kings with the Six Paths of Rebirth are intimately linked to the other dominant form of votive image in the medieval period: images of Pure Lands known as *bianxiang* 變相.

Kṣitigarbha, the Ten Kings, and Salvific Possibilities

Understanding that both Six and Five Paths operate in the revised context of soteriological and Pure Land beliefs and practices is crucial for grasping the unity of the underlying cosmological scheme, in which the visual, textual, and ritual materials representing the afterlife are bonded together into a seamless whole. Pure Land *bianxiang*, votive images of Kṣitigarbha, illustrated versions of the Scripture of the Ten Kings, and, as we will see, *laiying/raigō* 來迎 images of bodhisattvas, are by no means isolated forms but intimately related elements that coalesce into the cosmological *gestalt* of medieval Buddhism.

The extended title of the Scripture of the Ten Kings, already cited above, makes explicit this perceptual and experiential *gestalt*, its entailments, and most importantly its goal: “Scripture on the Prophecy of King Yama Rāja On the Sevens of Life as Pre-mortem Ritual for the Four Classes of Beings for Rebirth Into the Pure Land as Spoken by the Buddha.”⁴² The pivotal deities involved in the Buddhist version of purgatory are the Buddha, Kṣitigarbha, King Yama, Amitābha of the Pure Land, and bodhisattvas; the process comes to an end with the General of the Five Paths, who ensures the cooperation of the deceased in the final judgment. These deities are like vectors through which humans pass, eventually to be voided from the *dukha* world. Yet with every host, at every arrival, commitments (*yuan* 願) must be made and kept, relationships firmly established (*jiēyuan* 結緣), and emotional ties (*gānqīng* 感情) nurtured (*yang* 養). Just as eulogies for the deceased sometimes begin with a vow by Amitābha to all the people of Jambudvīpa offering them the possibility of establishing affinities with him (*youyuan* 有緣),⁴³ so too does the Scripture of the Ten Kings begin with a commitment to establishing karmic bonds (*shì quan youyuan* 誓勸有緣); and it concludes by promising affinities for all involved (*pushi youyuan* 普誓有緣).⁴⁴ Nothing can unfold until this gesture of commitment is made,

in the *Wan Xuzangjing* 卍續藏經 (Taipei: Xinwenfeng chubanshe 新文豐出版社, 1977; (hereafter X) 21, 1: 409b2-3).

42. *The Scripture Spoken by the Buddha on Pre-mortem Ritual of the Sevens of Life for the Ten Kings* 佛說預修十王生七經, X21, 1: 408a-410b; see Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings*, 196-219.

43. See Bai Juyi’s 白居易 “Eulogy on an Embroidered Image of the Pure Land” *Xiu xifang jingtu zhengzan* 繡西方淨土幀讚 (*Lebang wenlei* 樂邦文類, T1969, 47: 179c-180a).

44. See Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings*, p. 197 and p. 218. Teiser translates 誓勸有緣 as “May our vows and admonitions be lucky.” Rather than ‘luck,’ the goal of establishing affinities

and the ritual ends with its reiteration. As the title indicates, the scripture and the ritual it encodes encourage these affinities to be cultivated even before death, *i.e.*, the pre-mortem cultivation of the “Sevens of Life” (*nixiu shengqi* 逆修生七).⁴⁵ The deities invoked and praised in the text represent both horizontal and vertical axes of the cosmos.

The same figures are also invoked in a more regularized and formal process through the performance of the ritual calendar, notably on the Ten Feast Days of Kṣitigarbha (*Dizang pusa shizhairi* 地藏菩薩十齋日), a liturgy common throughout medieval China, Korea, and Japan.⁴⁶ On each ritual day, various deities descend to record the activities of all living beings; the General of the Five Paths does so at the behest of King Yama on the fifteenth day of the month — his appearance marking the middle of the month as well as the pivotal event in the sequence. If, at that point, one recites the name of Amitābha of the Pure land, one is saved from the perils of icy hells (十五日五道大將軍下，念阿彌陀佛，不墮寒水地獄).⁴⁷ The spatio-temporal placement of these deities in the liturgy mirrors the bipolar nature of the cosmos itself: hells below and heavens above.

A remarkable votive painting from Dunhuang, “Kṣitigarbha, the Pure Land, and the Ten Kings” (EO 3580) (Fig. 10), elaborates this entire cosmological framework and the spaces in which the determinative encounters take place.⁴⁸ The painting presents a synchronic “one-shot” summary of the deities, spaces, and processes necessary for an individual’s physio-moral progress. Their schematic arrangement, when understood in light of our revised conceptualization of the Six Paths, provides crucial insight into the unfolding of the soteriological process as part of a larger artistic and ritual program. As will be shown further below, Painting EO 3580 additionally helps us to demonstrate that one other major group of Buddhist images, *laiying/raigō* paintings depicting images of bodhisattvas in transit, are none other than depictions of the salvific Sixth Path in the cosmological model described above.

youyuan 有緣 was central to salvation in medieval China, and required ongoing commitments of great personal effort and expense.

45. The “Sevens of Life” (*shengqi* 生七) are pre-mortem liturgies (*nixiu* 逆修 or *yuxiu* 預修) held twice a month by the living in preparation for death. In contrast, the rituals known as *qiqi* 七七 “the seven sevens” are post-mortem feasts (*qiqizhai* 七七齋) held every week for seven weeks after death. See Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings*, 197, n. 2.

46. See Michel Soyminé, “Les dix jours de jeûne de Kṣitigarbha,” *Contributions aux études de Touen-Houang* 1 (1979), 135–159.

47. *Dizang pusa shizhai ri* 地藏菩薩十齋日, T2850, 85: 1300a. This configuration of deities, calendar, and rituals also appears in “Return of Merit” texts, *e.g.*, *Huixiang wen* 迴向文, T2848, 85: 1299c; and confessional texts such as *Chizhai nianfo chanhui liwen* 持齋念佛懺悔禮文, T2829, 85: 1266c.

48. Teiser, *Reinventing the Wheel*, 243–246. For additional images, see Jacques Giès, *Les arts de l’Asie Centrale: La collection Paul Pelliot du Musée National des Arts Asiatiques Guimet* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1996), v. 2, 307, Pl. 66; Nicole Vandier-Nicolas, *Bannières et peintures de Touen-Houang conservées au Musée Guimet: Documents archéologiques* (Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 1974), 255–257, Pl. 120; Mario Bussagli, *La peinture de l’Asie centrale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), Pl. 117.



Fig. 10: "Illustration of a Pure Land with Dizang and the Ten Kings," 10th century. Pigments on hemp cloth, 128 x 69 cm. Paris, Musée Guimet (EO 3580).



Fig. 11: Buddha path. Detail of Fig. 10.

Painting EO 3580 is neatly subdivided into two halves. The lower section features Kṣitigarbha and his associated iconography as it had become standardized by the tenth century: the Ten Kings, the monk Daoming 道明, the golden-haired lion, and the Boys of Good and Evil;⁴⁹ Kṣitigarbha sits at the center, one leg pendant in the *lalitāsana* pose, holding his wish-fulfilling jewel and staff, while the Six Paths of Rebirth radiate from his mandorla. The painting's upper section represents a Pure Land scene. The central figure appears to be Sākyamuni, flanked by two figures whose facial features suggest his primary disciples Ānanda and Kāśyapa. There are no lotuses in the pond, which would normally characterize rebirth into a Pure land, and the stairs customarily directed into the pond for the use of newly-reborn souls extend strikingly outward in a *trompe l'œil* manner over the brocade border. Of particular interest, however, is the mid-center right-hand portion of the image (Fig. 11). To the upper right rises a triumvirate of figures in the lotus position, each on its own cloud.

The seated Buddha figure recalls the one in the above-mentioned illustrated manuscript of the *Scripture of the Ten Kings* (S.3961, see Fig. 6), although here he is clearly leading souls out of the saṃsāric realm. What is labeled in the latter as the Path of Becoming a Buddha (*chengfo dao*) is evidently also the path of being led (*yinlu* 引路) to Buddhahood — a salvific path on which an individual may take along others, including one's family.⁵⁰ The combination, in painting EO 3580, of

49. Zhiru (*The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva*, 150-158) surveys these features in medieval Chinese art, especially as found in Sichuan.

50. In addition to Pure Lands and heavenly abodes as salvational destinies, the veneration of Kṣitigarbha also enables family members to be reborn together in the Merit Lodge *fushe* 福舍. See Zhiru, *The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva*, 182-183.



Fig. 12: Kṣitigarbha in hell with paths of rebirth. Mural painting on the east wall of Cave 33 at Yulin, Anxi (Gansu). From *Anxi Yulin ku*, pl. 77.



Fig. 13: Kṣitigarbha in hell; note black-haloed bodhisattva leading the deceased along a path. Detail of Fig. 12.

Kṣitigarbha, the Ten Kings, and a bodhisattva who guides the souls to paradisaical realms in a single visual frame establishes this painting as a summary image of reincarnational options and soteriological possibilities. As such, it bears a striking resemblance to the Marquise of Dai's banner from Mawangdui, which also places the deceased in a schematic three-tiered overview of the cosmos, although its depiction does not imply a sense of narrative progression.⁵¹ Similarly, the verticality of painting EO 3580 ensures that the desired realm of the heavens, in this case a Pure Land, dominates the pictorial program while Kṣitigarbha below centers the divergent alternative options for rebirth situated within the netherworld context of the Ten Kings. The fact that the identity of both the Pure Land and the *yinlu* figure remains vague is not problematic but strategic: by presenting the overall schema without making explicit the iconographical details, the painting leaves open different possibilities that may be configured according to different demands. In the following, I elaborate on additional sets of imagery that present the specifics.

A number of images in different media depicting the Six Paths associated with both the Kṣitigarbha and the Ten Kings feature a Buddha or bodhisattva as psychopomp leading the deceased. Cave 33 at Yulin 榆林, Anxi 安西 (Gansu) contains a mural (Fig. 12) similar in configuration to painting EO 3580. Kṣitigarbha is shown in the midst of hellish tortures as Paths of Rebirth stream from his mandorla. On the upper right stands a bodhisattva with *paridhāna* and halo, leading the deceased away from these horrors (Fig. 13).⁵² The complexity of the various afterlife possibilities have here been reduced to the most relevant alternatives of rebirth: hell (below), the human realm (upper left), and salvation through the Buddha path (upper right). The larger framework of the Paths of Rebirth and the variety of soteriological options are implied, though not depicted in detail. The situation is analogous to Le Goff's comment on the significance of purgatory as a relational construct: meaning derives from the larger picture of which the intended viewer is aware.

Another central figure in medieval Buddhist mythology, Maudgalyāyana/Mulian 目連, came up in our above discussion of the General of the Five Paths. Although inherently connected with the Ten Kings and Kṣitigarbha in the vast netherworld complex, Mulian is not typically associated with the cult or veneration of either.⁵³ However, the Mulian tableau in Yulin Cave 33 (Fig. 14)⁵⁴ features the General of the Five Paths and the six karmic destinies in the exact same arrangement and

51. Wu Hung, "Art in a Ritual Context," 126. Rawson ("The Eternal Palaces of the Western Han" and "The Power of Images") also argues that tombs function in this paradigmatic way.

52. Images of the Six Paths emanating from Kṣitigarbha's body are a common iconographical configuration. See the article by Zhang Zong in this issue.

53. Zhiru, *The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva*, 154–155.

54. Thought previously to be depictions of hell, this painting has been conclusively identified as a set of episodes from the Mulian story. See Fan Jinshi 樊錦詩 and Mei Lin 梅林, "An Interpretation of the Maudgalyāyana Murals in Cave 19 at Yulin," *Orientalism* 27.10 (November 1996): 70–75, originally published as "Yulin ku di 19 ku Mulian bianxiang kaoshi" 榆林窟第19窟目連變相考釋, in Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan 敦煌研究院 (ed.), *Duan Wenjie Dunhuang yanjiu wushi nian jinian wenji* 段文傑敦煌研究五十年紀念文集 (Beijing: Shijie Tushu Chubanshe 世界圖書出版公司, 1996), 46–55.

proportions as in the *Scripture of the Ten Kings* (S.3961, see Fig. 6), and it shares schematic similarities with Stein Painting 80 (see Fig. 8), P.2870 (see Fig. 9), and other works.⁵⁵ On close examination, one also discovers a guiding bodhisattva dressed in flowing *paridhāna* followed by a deceased person, hands raised in the *añjali mudrā* (Fig 15). The occurrence of these motifs in a mural depicting the travails of Mulian demonstrates the dispersal of the new model of the cosmos containing a Path of Becoming a Buddha into an increasing variety of visual and textual narratives.⁵⁶

Guiding Bodhisattvas as the Sixth Path

Also found among the Dunhuang materials were separate votive images of *yinlu* figures that include donors (Fig. 16). These are individualized presentations of the Sixth Path. They are, furthermore, precursors to the well-known *laiying/raigō* paintings, which eventually became a staple of medieval Buddhism throughout East Asia.⁵⁷ Understood within the larger Six-Path schema of the moral universe, these images are in effect freeze-frame sequences of the Sixth Path, which in turn evoke the larger narrative structures and salvific prescriptions of the Buddhist cosmos as whole. In this sense, the term *yinlu* indicates a generalized role of the bodhisattva as a psychopomp. Such a schematized soteriological model allows for core structures to recur across a large number of domains as organizational stratagems, inclusive of diverse perceptual and experiential modes and needs. Such constrained flexibility is crucial; soteriological agenda pertain to the specifics of time and place and therefore require different inflections of their principal celestial divine agents.⁵⁸ Although Avalokiteśvara in his manifestation as *Guanyin yinlu pusa* 觀音引路菩薩, and later Amitābha, are often viewed as the definitive *laiying* figures, in fact many different bodhisattvas come to fill this role.⁵⁹ The diverse possibilities for a rebirth in paradise necessitated that these figures remain unspecified, because the Pure Lands, the Tuṣita and Trāyastriṃśa Heavens, the Merit Lodge (*fushe*), and the Palace of the Seven Jewels (*qibao gongdian* 七寶宮殿) all involved different mediators. However, the role of a psychopomp remained a constant as configured in the interactional logic of human and social dynamics required to negotiate the moral topography.

55. E.g., a manuscript of the *Scripture of the Ten Kings* in the Satō collection. See Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings*, fig. 13b. Annemarie von Gabain, “The Purgatory of the Buddhist Uighurs: Book Illustrations from Turfan” (in William Watson [ed.], *Mahayana Art after A.D. 900* [Colloquies on Art and Archaeology in Asia, v. 2; London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and Perceval David Foundation of Chinese Art, 1972], 25–35) indicates that an Uighur illustrated text on the Ten Kings contains the scene similarly formatted.

56. Although a *yinlu* bodhisattva is not mentioned in any Mulian narrative, the story states that Mulian’s father attained a paradisiacal realm.

57. See Zhiru, *The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva*, 158–160.

58. Cf. Michael Kimmel, “Metaphor, Imagery, and Culture: Spatialized Ontologies, Mental Tools, and Multimedia in the Making,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Vienna, 2002, 525.

59. See Fusae Candice Kanda, “The Development of Amida Raigō Painting: Style, Concept, and Landscape,” (Ph.D dissertation, Yale University, 2002), xxx, n. 1.

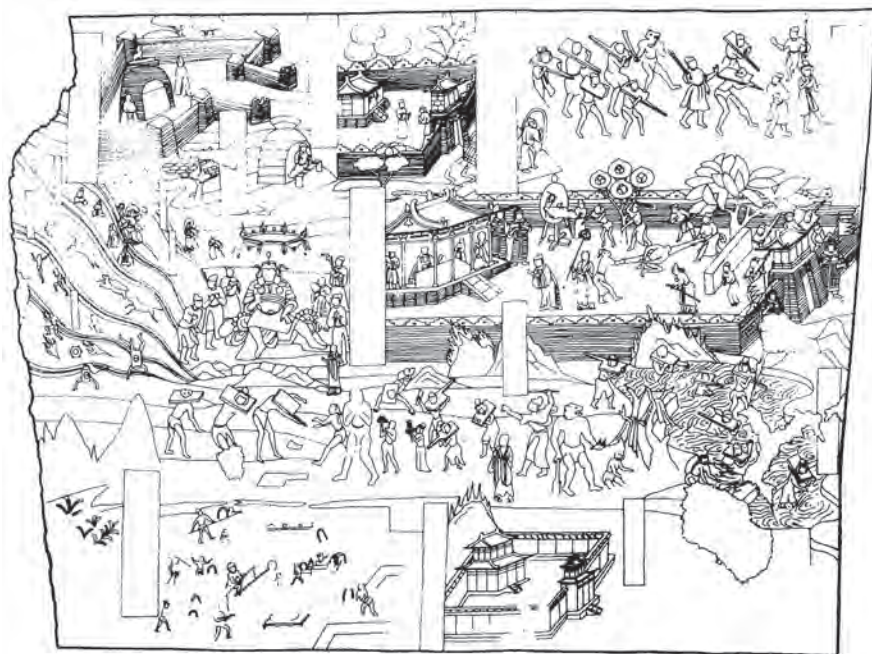


Fig. 14: Line drawing of the Mulian narrative. Mural painting on the entrance corridor of Cave 19 at Yulin, Anxi (Gansu). From Fan and Mei, "Interpretation of the Maudgalyayana Murals in Cave 19 at Yulin," Fig. 2.

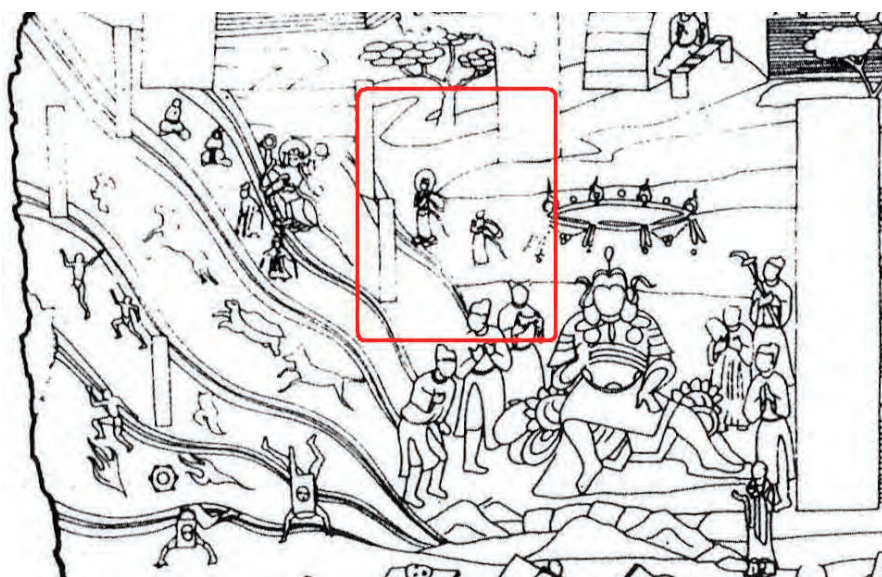


Fig. 15: Yinlu bodhisattva and deceased. Detail of Fig. 14.



Fig 16: Bodhisattva Who Leads the Way (*Yinlu pusa*), from Cave 17 at Mogao, Dunhuang (Gansu), d. 900-950. Pigments on silk, 138 x 53 cm. Paris, Musée Guimet (MG 26461).

The *Scripture of the Ten Kings*, as well, lays out these schemata while leaving undetermined the specific agents who might occupy the roles. At death “The Kings of Heaven will forever guide them, and bodhisattvas will offer flowers to welcome them” 天王恒引接, 菩薩捧花迎, while he who promotes the scripture may expect that in his final moments “bodhisattvas will personally come to welcome him” 菩薩臨終自往迎.⁶⁰ The scripture does not specify *which* kings or bodhisattvas will be present or *what* the destination is. The sūtra presents a generic script that leaves such details open. Proper social interaction in the form of ritual encounters is crucial to attaining moral status in the next life. These divine figures are moral arbiters who judge actions that are, above all, filial actions. The conceptual frame that structures these interactions is the ancestral cult. Only to those making offerings on their parents’ behalf, as repayment for the debt of having raised them can the various spirits, officers, and bureaucrats of the netherworld respond in kind (*ying wei bao’en* 應為報恩). The recognition of those filial actions allows (*ying* 應) the parents to attain rebirth in Heaven (*ling de sheng Tian* 令得生天).⁶¹ These human-divine relationships thus not only mirror but also valorize the dynamics and morality of earthly interaction: “what the rules of propriety value is reciprocity” (*lishang wanglai*), in this case a reciprocity firmly grounded in sacrifice for ancestors. What incites compassion (*qi cimei* 起慈悲) — and thus assistance — among the officials of the netherworld are the charitable acts by compassionate and at the same time filial men and women (*cixiao nannü* 慈孝男女).⁶² The fundamental principle operative in conjunction with these images and rituals is the empathy of the encounter itself (*gan* 感 or *ganqing* 感情), which permits its response (*fu* 福, *bao* 報).⁶³ When functioning as psychopomps, Kṣitigarbha and *yinlu pusa* thus function within a much larger tableau that weaves together different discursive strands and spatio-temporal junctures along multiple, though unspecified, salvational paths.

Indigenous Chinese Models and the Paths of Rebirth

Such models of social interaction and physio-moral dispositions are not the product of medieval Buddhism. The division of the Paths of Rebirth into a set of five saṃsāric modes of existence and one opposed path of transcendent rebirth leading to paradisiacal realms strikingly mirrors developments in early religious Daoism. Stephen Bokenkamp has recently made the distinction between “generalized

60. Edited text in X21, 1: 409a24. Translated in Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings*, 209.

61. X21, 1: 409b8 and X21, 1: 409b6. Translated *ibid.*, 209.

62. X21, 1: 409b4. Translated *ibid.*, 209-210.

63. Charles Jones (“Foundations of Ethics and Practice in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism.” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 10 [2003], 13) states: “Because the mind of the Buddha Amitābha is marked by great compassion for all beings, then the Pure Land practitioner’s mind also needs compassion as a fundamental motivation. Unless one’s mind and the Buddha’s mind are consonant in this manner, one will not create *ganying* 感應, and will not elicit the deployment of the Buddha’s other-power and attain rebirth in the Pure Land.”

paths” of rebirth and a “specialized path” of rebirth in medieval Daoist texts.⁶⁴ The former are articulated at length in Lingbao 靈寶 scriptures and discussed in terms of “cycling” (*lunzhuan* 輪轉) through births and deaths,” while the latter typically involves ascent into the Heavens (*shengtian* 升/昇天, or *shangtian* 上天; also *shengtian* 生天) and the refinement of the body through the physical, spiritual, and moral practices expounded by the Shangqing 上清 scriptures. Bokenkamp’s description intimately resonates with the model of the Buddhist cosmos presented above. He writes: “What I am characterizing here as ‘generalized rebirths’ supposes an unchanging system in which all individual deeds are directly and causally linked to future states of being. ... What I characterize as ‘specialized rebirth’ lacks such a system for all beings. Instead, it is a sort of ‘rebirth’ into heavens or other future state[s] of being that is granted, usually by deities, as a special reward for select individuals who earn it.”⁶⁵ In his discussion of medieval Daoist scriptures, ideas, and practices, Bokenkamp is careful to point out that modes of interaction and assimilation between religions are not the result of the “billiard ball image of causality.”⁶⁶ In particular, he draws on a distinction between what Robert Campney terms internalist and externalist arguments. Internalist arguments are framed within a limited and often self-referential discourse. Externalist arguments on the other hand, “are inherently associative or contrastive,”⁶⁷ and are “arguments that function to set the ideas of a speaker or writer in opposition to certain prevailing societal values and presuppositions.”⁶⁸ Daoist texts, Bokenkamp contends, are articulated “as responses to Buddhism, rather than evidence of the influence of Buddhism.”⁶⁹ In our case however, it is possible that the response goes the other direction. The discourse on rebirth evidenced by the Dunhuang materials discussed above may, in other words, be understood as a Buddhist rejoinder to Daoist and indigenous ideas of soteriology. But we cannot exclude, at the present stage of our understanding, that, as stipulated by Bokenkamp, *Shangqing* Daoist models were indeed a response to a Buddhist cosmology that had already adapted itself to native Chinese ideas of ritual reciprocity and had revised the canonical understanding of the Paths of Rebirth to incorporate Pure Land beliefs and other soteriological options. At a more basic level, it seems most fruitful to explain the similarities observed by insisting on the point that the medieval Chinese worldview was a coherent *gestalt* functioning within a larger ecology of conceptual frames, and that Buddhist and Daoist soteriological cosmologies both grew out of these shared fundamental cultural conceptions. In this connection, I would also like to insist that what has been described in the

64. Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety: Daoism and the Birth of Rebirth in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 162–191.

65. *Ibid.*, 163, n. 9.

66. Bokenkamp (*ibid.*, 11, n. 23) relies on Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 58–60.

67. Robert F. Campney, “The Meanings of Cuisines of Transcendence in Late Classical and Early Medieval China,” *T’oung Pao* 91.1 (2005): 2.

68. Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety*, 192.

69. *Ibid.*, 11 (emphasis in the original). These two modes of arguments can also be understood as referring to two different sets of conceptual frames.

preceding are not “popular” phenomena representative of some non-standard sub-category of Buddhism, but the mainstream of Chinese Buddhism.

Conclusion

Why have scholars of Buddhism overlooked the complex and far-reaching reorganization of the medieval Buddhist cosmos, continuing to expound a model that on so many levels is inappropriate for the Chinese context? The answer has to do with the authority and legitimizing function of canonical scriptures and the slow pace of incorporating the material record into Buddhist studies. Obviously, the widely accepted model based on legitimate canonical scriptures continued in medieval China to communicate some of the core ideas of Buddhism, such as rebirth, repeating cycles, and constancy within change, in terms of the metaphor of the wheel. Yet it is highly curious that no one in the Chinese Buddhist tradition ever took the trouble to take issue systematically with the quite different ideas of death and rebirth as manifested in the evidence presented above, even though these divergent ideas were pervasively articulated throughout the medieval Chinese Buddhist sphere. Presumably, if they had been considered a challenge in the face of what was authoritative and acceptable, they would have been contested vociferously. But they were not: over more than a millennium, no scholastic debate about deviant views and heretical representations paid any attention to the competing soteriological models discussed above, and no one articulated them coherently in order to dismiss them from a traditional canonical perspective. There were certainly challenges among sectarian groups about which divine agents were more efficacious, or which destinations were more desirable — but those debates took for granted the validity of the non-canonical soteriological premises outlined above.

Rather, the cosmology presented above has remained uncontested for the simple reason that it was considered completely ordinary and was thoroughly integrated into the quotidian Buddhist experience. Furthermore, it coherently integrates diverse phenomena at the level of cognition across experiential domains. Here and elsewhere it is precisely the cognitive effortlessness and the commonsensical nature of the ordinary that makes any contradiction vis-à-vis canonical orthodoxy unremarkable to those who practice it, and thus causes it to remain unremarked; for the same reason, such matters appear opaque to those of us who stand outside the living tradition of practice.

In summary, our analysis has revealed a coherent model of death and rebirth dominant in medieval Chinese Buddhism that differs from canonical explanations. No single text, canonical or otherwise, captures the complexities and nuances of this model, which was instead elaborated through imagery, discourse, and ritual action. Sets of images and objects centered on Kṣitigarbha, the Ten Kings, Pure Lands, and transitional figures such as *yinlu* bodhisattvas provided the dominant frames of reference for medieval Chinese Buddhist believers. These materials articulate a dynamic *gestalt* that embraces a range of soteriological options available since about the eighth century. They are embedded in indigenous models of ritual interaction

on multiple levels: as depictions of the human-divine contact illustrated by the images, as donations that initiated such ritual encounters, and as visual summaries of possible results of those encounters.

Our findings not only resolve our initial question of why depictions of the Wheel of Rebirth are so rare in medieval China, but they have sufficient explanatory force to make coherent sense of a wide body of visual and textual materials from Dunhuang and other places. Future work will have to reassess more comprehensively such core Buddhist concepts as the body, processes of physio-moral transformation, and soteriological goals. For the moment, let it be merely stated that the conceptual frames here sketched out do much more than simply help us interpret pictures of the Paths of Rebirth. Drawing on fundamental cultural concepts and social models, they explain a logic of thought and action that applies far more widely across the diverse experiential realms of medieval China. It should also be stressed that this cultural logic draws on pre-Buddhist religious traditions that involved the use of sacred objects functioning through similar cognitive and social dynamics. The approach here taken, aiming at integrating material culture, thought, and ritual action into a seamless whole, can thus be fruitfully applied through the continuity of Chinese cultural history, helping us to account both for the innovations that Buddhism brought to East Asia and the ways it incorporated preexisting strategies to come to terms with the mordant urgency of death.

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